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SUBJECT: PRM A/S SAUERBREY MEETS ETHNIC MINORITY RETURNEES FROM
CAMBODIA

REF: 06 HCMC 1186 AND PREVIOUS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a visit to the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai February 1-2, PRM Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey toured a village near the Cambodian border to meet with six ethnic Jarai returnees and their families. The interviews were conducted in the presence of ethnic village elders, but none of the returnees expressed any fear of persecution or mistreatment prior to their flight to Cambodia or their return to Vietnam even when speaking out of earshot of any minders. All the returnees were young, poor and badly educated. They did not have a clear idea of why they went to Cambodia and there was little awareness of resettlement expressed. The visit helped highlight that many ethnic minority communities lack the skills to compete successfully in a rapidly modernizing and increasingly competitive local economy. However, even a modest improvement in agricultural and animal husbandry techniques or the introduction of new crops such as pepper, could greatly improve the economic conditions for the ethnic minority villagers in the area and reduce the flow of persons across the Cambodian border. Septel will cover other elements of the Assistant Secretary's visit to HCMC and Gia Lai. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) During a visit to the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai February 1-2, PRM Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey visited the village of Ba near the Cambodian border to meet with six ethnic Jarai returnees and their families. These individuals were among 30 involuntary returnees recently repatriated to the Central Highlands under the UNHCR Tripartite Agreement after being rejected for refugee status by both UNHCR and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS).

¶3. (SBU) Provincial government officials insisted that the ethnic minority village elders sit in on the returnee visits in accordance with "the customs and traditions of the ethnic minority community." Overall, the atmosphere in the meetings and in the village was relaxed. Returnees, other villagers and many young children milled alongside as the Assistant Secretary walked through the village. Our provincial government minders were ignored. Virtually all the homes in the village -- and all the homes of the returnees we visited -- had electricity.

¶4. (SBU) All the border crossers from the village were ethnic Jarai. With one exception, we were able to converse with the returnees in Vietnamese, utilizing the services of a ConGen interpreter.

15. (SBU) Rolan Hpinh (MNT-641), age 22, was a daughter of the senior village elder. Immediately after repatriation, she spent two days in Pleiku being interviewed by the authorities on the reasons for her flight to Cambodia and conditions in the camps before being returned home. Hpinh told the Assistant Secretary that she was happy to be home as she "missed her family." She "followed her friends" in an effort to get resettled to the United States for a "better life." She said that she also was prompted to go after police had questioned her at home and accused her of lying over the plans of other friends who had crossed to Cambodia. Her cousin Rolan Chao (MTN-627) crossed the border with her. Another family member also had gone to Cambodia and had been returned in 2006.

16. (SBU) Since repatriation, Hpinh returned to work on her father's plot of land, which she estimated to be between one and two hectares (2.5 to 5 acres) of cassava and cashews. The family owns a television, motorbike and three head of cattle. Hpinh has a ninth-grade education. Her brother dropped out of school after fifth grade and one sister after third. Another sister, however, finished high school and now is a teacher. The family is Catholic and able to practice their faith without hindrance. She has been treated well since her return and life is "the same as before." She has not been visited by police since her return to the village. She noted that she had a friend (NFI) whose circumstances were similar to her own, who had been resettled overseas. Hpinh said that she wanted to continue with her studies, but the family could not afford the VND 20,000 to 30,000 a month (USD 1.50 to 2 USD) for school fees. Hpinh's father smoked store-bought cigarettes.

17. (SBU) Rolan Chao, 22, Hpinh's cousin, told us that he decided to cross the border in October 2006 with his wife,

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Rmah Hoa, and one-year old child. Chao and his family live with his in-laws. He and his wife have fifth-grade educations. They help cultivate his in-laws two to three hectares (5 - 7.5 acres) of cassava as well as another 2,000 square meter plot in the village. The family owns a motorbike. Chao said he was interviewed only briefly by local police upon his return to the village. Chao's five siblings all work on family land, but he said, there was not enough for everyone. He complained that the state had taken without compensation land that his family had cleared when it opened a local rubber plantation some years ago. The family did not have any legal title for this land, however.

18. (SBU) Chao is Protestant. He said that conditions for religious practice had improved considerably in recent years. He noted that the village had a good Christmas celebration. Chao had no complaints about mistreatment since his return.

19. (SBU) Ksor Nueh (MTN-632), 22, said that he fled to Cambodia in October 2005 with his partner Rahlan Phich, 18. (Rahlan gave birth to a child while in Cambodia.) Neither he nor his partner had any formal schooling. They work in her family's two hectares (5 acres) of cassava. Nueh has 13 siblings; Phich has five. They said that the family does not grow enough food to support itself. Nueh told the Assistant Secretary that they decided to "follow others from the village" and crossed into Cambodia. They paid VND 500,000 (USD 32) to a smuggler to facilitate the crossing. Rahlan Phich told us that her family was Protestant, but that she gave up religion at the insistence of her Nueh, who was not religious. Nueh said that he had been interviewed four times by UNHCR in Cambodia before being informed that his refugee petition was rejected. They had

no complaints of mistreatment since their return.

¶10. (SBU) The Assistant Secretary met Rmah Phyeo, age 20, with her father in their (relatively) well-appointed home. Phyeo understood Vietnamese, but "had forgotten how to speak," having dropped out of school in the fourth grade. (Her father translated for us from Jarai into Vietnamese.) Phyeo said that her older sister did not go to school; her brother dropped out after fourth grade. Phyeo followed her boyfriend across to Cambodia. After her return, she was interviewed once at home by local border authorities. She resumed working as a farmer in her father's five to six acres of fields.

¶11. (SBU) Phyeo's father told us that he had attended agricultural extension classes in the village sponsored by the government. He had the class materials "somewhere in the house," but "the Jarai do not have the ability" to apply the instructions, he said. Phyeo's father also said that the family lost "a few hectares" of land that he had cleared when the state developed the local rubber plantation. The family did not receive any compensation, but also did not have or seek title to the land.

The Ethnic Vietnamese Shopkeeper

¶12. (SBU) The village general store was run by an ethnic Vietnamese family who had migrated to the area from Thanh Hoa province in northern Vietnam. The shopkeeper told us that conditions in Thanh Hoa were "very difficult," prompting their decision to leave eight years ago. They moved to the Cambodian border area after working in Gia Lai's provincial capital of Pleiku for four years. Her husband was out working a one-hectare plot of land that had been given to them by the ethnic minority villagers after they saw "how poor we were." The shopkeeper's three children were in school; the eldest, aged 13, would begin studying English next year, she proudly told us.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) The visit to the village of Ba was representative of the challenges facing the ethnic minority returnees and their peers between the ages of 16 and 25. Their economic future is not bright. Most are uneducated and uncompetitive for even the few menial non-farm jobs available. They have few prospects other than working the family farm. However, family landholdings increasingly are too fractured to subdivide. The returnees are competing with their many other siblings for the family's land. Land that the villagers once called their own -- traditional tribal lands -- have largely been taken over by state-owned

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rubber and coffee plantations.

¶14. (SBU) Ethnic Vietnamese settlers and successful ethnic minority farmers that we have met in the Central Highlands maximize the value of their landholdings, converting the areas around their homes into gardens, engaging in animal husbandry or planting high-yield, high-density crops such as pepper. Unfortunately, we did not see a single pepper vine, a pig sty or a chicken coop in the village. While the government does run at least some agricultural extension programs, there appears to be a real barrier to absorption and application by ethnic minority farmers. The silver lining may be that, starting from such a low base, even a modest improvement in agricultural techniques or the introduction of new crops, could greatly improve the economic conditions for the ethnic minority villagers in the area.

¶15. (SBU) While the government fears over ethnic minority separatism and the role of the "Dega Protestant Church"

continue to be a factor, government and village officials appeared more relaxed than in the past. This was our second visit to the village and our second interaction with the village elders. In contrast to the frosty reception we received in October 2006 (reftel), the village elders were more relaxed and much less doctrinaire. For example, during our first visit, they said firmly that they opposed the spread of Protestantism in the village because it was a "counter-revolutionary religion." In contrast, during the Assistant Secretary's visit, one elder told us in a private conversation walking between returnee homes that it was his responsibility to help ensure that all religions were able to practice freely. There also was a new Christian meeting point in the village since our last visit. (None of the villagers we spoke with were sure if the meeting point belonged to the Catholic Church or a Protestant group.)

116. (U) Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey has cleared this message.
Winnick